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Ruins and Poetics in the Works of W.G. Sebald

Simon Ward

There is a continual danger of misrepresenting of the complex and subtle self-reflective style of Sebald's work. In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald cites Chateaubriand on the problem of doing justice to one's subject: 'I was troubled by the question of whether in the writing I should not once again betray and lose Charlotte Ives, and this time forever.' (RS 254-5/302) Any examination of the content and themes of Sebald's works has to take into account that this content is continually disrupted and placed in question by Sebald's formal strategies. In an attempt to do justice to these complexities, this article follows the 'thread' of the ruin through the labyrinths of *The Emigrants* and *The Rings of Saturn*, arguing that the ruin is central to both the content and the form of Sebald's literary production.

The architectural historian Robert Harbison has proposed that the ruin represents a 'way of seeing': the spectator's perspective is always constitutive of the meaning of the ruin (Harbison 1991: 99). Peter Geimer, writing on the attitude of artists and aestheticians in the second half of the eighteenth century, observes that the ruin was the 'empty space ('Leerstelle') par excellence', and enabled them to insert 'texts, images and imagination into those empty spaces' (Geimer, 2001: 8). Both Geimer and Harbison emphasise the ruin as a site for projection, where narratives can be constructed to fill in the gaps in the material. Sebald's ruins are an investigation of ways of seeing, a central concern of his works. From that central concern, following the 'thread' of the ruin leads us into other important areas of Sebald's labyrinthine work. In terms of the content, the topos of the ruin allows both a consideration of a 'metaphysics of nature' that haunts the text (Huyssen, 2001, 84), and a consideration of those ruins specific to Sebald, the cities whose post-

war ruinous appearance seemed to him their 'natural condition' (E 30/46). In terms of form, it enables the elucidation of a tradition of the ruin in which Sebald's writing can be placed, while starting from a close reading of textual sequences that illustrate his complex and subtle self-reflective style.

When looking at the presentation of ruins in Sebald's work, the potential complexity of these suggestions begins to reveal itself. Four different sites of ruin are considered in the following – Jerusalem, Orfordness, Berlin, and Manchester – with as great a focus on the similarities in their formal presentation as on their thematic significance for differing narratives of ruination, since they illustrate in part Georg Simmel's suggestion that the ruin 'creates the present form of a past life, not according to the contents or remnants of that life, but according to its past as such.' (Simmel 1959: 265) These ruins are, fundamentally, the presence of the past in the present.

Jerusalem is the archetype of the ruined city, although it also appears as a reconstructed model in Sebald's works. The depiction of Jerusalem in *The Emigrants* is mediated through the voice of Ambros Adelwarth's diary. The first description of Jerusalem is a detached aesthetic gaze which highlights the effect of the light and the framing effect of the landscape: 'A rosy glow lay upon the valley, and through an opening in the mountainous terrain we could see the promised city in the distance – a ruined and broken mass of rocks, the Queen of the desert ...' (E 136/202) The final remarks enshrine two ways of seeing the ruin: as a 'meaningless' mass of material and as an ideal construction. This sense of distance is also found in a passage highlighting the gaze that constructs the ruinous landscape. Ambros and Cosmos travel out to the Mount of Olives and look across from the Josaphat valley to where the 'silent city rises from the white limestone with its domes, towers and ruins': 'Over the rooftops not a sound, not a trace of

smoke, nothing. Nowhere, as far as the eye can see, is there any sign of life, not an animal scurrying by, or even the smallest bird in flight.’ (E 141/208)

The depopulated nature of Sebald’s landscapes of ruin has been commented on before (e.g. Juhl, 1995, 653; Kastura, 1996, 209). On the surface, this is paradoxical, given that his works are very much about individual human stories.ⁱ This depopulation is a function of a perspective that views the ruin as a building or buildings (apparently) without human use or function. The perspective from which the ruin is seen (and thus constructed) is the ‘high vantage-point’ (a phrase which recurs in Sebald’s work), an almost impossible, ‘inhuman’ perspective where the observer is not part of the landscape.ⁱⁱ

The process of Jerusalem’s ruination is told not through this gaze upon the ruins, nor is it directly narrated, but is mediated through a guidebook bought in Paris. ‘The age of destruction’ was a project that was for years deliberately organised by the Caesars, and thus has echoes of the premeditated planning that lay behind the bombing campaigns of the Second World War. As the archetype of the ruined city, Jerusalem’s ruination is the result of planned human destruction. What remains of Jerusalem is nothing but ‘dry stone and a remote idea in the heads of its people, now dispersed throughout the world.’ (142/210).

In the ruination of the city, the idea and the material have become separated, as was suggested in the double description in Ambros Adelwarth’s diary quoted above. The construction of the (ruined) idea can be conjured up only from the distance, in the models of the city and of the temple that recur in Sebald’s texts (E 176/263; RS 247-249/292-4), or from the perspective of the (uncommented) image of Jerusalem which spans pp.138-9/206-7 in *The Emigrants*. The text surrounding the image offers a contradictory commentary about ‘foul puddles and cesspits’, for the sensory experience of Jerusalem is full of physical unpleasantness. It is also a disorientating

experience, something repeated at Orfordness (RS 136/203). The exterritorial space of the ruin causes the time-space continuum to be suspended. The ruins of Jerusalem thus illustrate the problem of perspective and the need for artifice: it is Max Ferber who describes the model of the (intact) Jerusalem as giving him a sense for the first time of what was ‘a true work of art’ (E 176/263). At the same time, the textual discussion of a bird’s eye perspective of the model of the Jerusalem temple in *The Rings of Saturn* is undercut by the fact that the photograph with which the reader is presented is taken from within the model, and is so blurred as to render it almost meaningless (RS 248/293).

If Jerusalem represents the original ruin, then Orfordness in *The Rings of Saturn* appears as the final ruin at the end of the earth. In Orfordness, we are in another of those ‘extraterritorial’ regions that recur in Sebald’s work. The geological formation of Orfordness is the result of a process of natural history, as it had been shifted to its current location ‘stone by stone, over a period of millennia’ (RS 233/280). The buildings on Orfordness seem initially to belong to this pre-historical narrative: ‘From a distance, the concrete shells [...] looked (probably because of their odd conical shape) like the tumuli in which the mighty and powerful were buried in prehistoric times [...]’ (RS 235-6/281) Through the inscription of his distance from the object, the spectator denotes this pre-historical narrative as his projection on to the ruin. This narrative is apparently corrected from a different, closer perspective: ‘But the closer I came to the ruins [...] the more I imagined myself amidst the remains of our civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe’. (RS 237/282) As indicated by the ‘imagined’, this is a further projection, in this case of the future on to the ruin. As the narrator comments that he felt ‘out of time’ and ‘out of place’, these projections can be read as establishing a parallel between the prehistoric and the futuristic modern in a continuity of, or return to, natural history. The ruin as a site for projection

is underlined by the conclusion of this chapter, as the narrator looks back to Orford: ‘There, I thought, I was once at home. And then, through the growing dazzle of the light in my eyes, I suddenly saw, amidst the darkening colours, the sails of the long-vanished windmills turning heavily in the wind.’ (RS 237/283) The inclusion of the ‘I thought’ creates distance between the moment of narration and the moment being narrated, when the spectator was becoming increasingly blinded, and projecting the images of the (ruined) windmills which we had encountered at the beginning of the journey: ‘some ruined conical brick buildings, like relics of an extinct civilization. These are all that remains of the countless wind pumps and windmills. [...] Sometimes I think, when I look over there, that everything is already dead.’ (RS 30/42-3; the final sentence missing from translation.)

The windmills are a reminder that the perception of ruined technology is indeed a matter of perspective. The passage suggests not only a historical continuity of technological rise and fall, but also a literary continuity of projection into the extraterritorial ruined space that is also the space of the imagination, the space for a literary stylization of the narrator as a Quixote tilting against the (imagined) windmills of progress. So while it is possible to read Orfordness as a site of natural-historical processes from the pre-historic past to the catastrophic future, all these perspectives are marked as projections, as possible, but not definitive, ways of seeing.

Orfordness in *The Rings of Saturn* is the projection of a self-stylizing narrator, while Jerusalem in *The Emigrants* is mediated, in principle at least, through the perspective of Ambros Adelwarth’s diary. A similar process is at work in the representation of the ruins of post-war Berlin in *The Rings of Saturn*, for here the remembrances belong to Michael Hamburger. These recollections, or rather Hamburger’s attempts to recall his childhood in Berlin before his family’s emigration to the United Kingdom, are situated within a meditation on the workings of memory:

‘Whenever a shift in our spiritual life occurs and fragments such as these surface, we believe we can remember. But in reality, of course, memory fails us. Too many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable.’ (RS 177/211)

This passage is concerned with the impossibility of accessing memories. In the context of our ‘thread’, however, the employment of architectural metaphor to illustrate the process of sedimentation is significant because it *precedes* reference to the actual ‘buildings’ and ‘rubble’ of post-war Berlin. Important too is the use of the passive, a technique that Sebald often employs in the context of the ruin, and that implies the absence of, or at least a refusal to name, an active agent in the process of ruination, something underlined by the use of natural-historical metaphors. While the passage does not clarify the nature of this ‘memory-fragment’, the following excerpt gives us an inkling:

If I now look back to Berlin, writes Michael, all I see is the darkened background with a grey smudge in it, a slate pencil drawing, some unclear numbers and letters in a gothic script, blurred and half wiped away with a damp rag. Perhaps this blind spot is also a vestigial image of the ruins through which I wandered in 1947 when I returned to my native city for the first time to search for traces of the life I had lost. (RS 178/212).

On the one hand, this fragment is the (extinguished) trace of a piece of writing, perhaps on a blackboard; on the other it may be a blind spot which is the ‘after-image’ of the ruined landscape. In other words, it is not the ruins themselves, nor the original image of them, but the retinal trace thereof. This section sets at several removes the material of the ruins themselves, the ‘facades, smoke-blackened brick walls and fields of rubble’ (RS 178/212) through which

Hamburger wandered 'like a sleepwalker'. First, by means of the metaphor which precedes them; second due to the fact that they have actually become a blind spot written over other, earlier memories, and, third, because these are Hamburger's recollections, and not those of the narrator.

Given that the ruins are experienced in a kind of sleepwalk, it is not surprising that the image of the ruined Berlin that does remain is a hallucinatory one of an empty site filled with 'bricks retrieved from the ruins'. Hamburger's vision, not of ruins, but of the preparatory stage to reconstruction, shares many characteristics of the 'ways of seeing' we have already noted:

If I now think back to that desolate place, I do not see a single human being, only bricks, millions of bricks [...] – a deathly silent image of the onset of winter, which I sometimes suspect may have originated in a hallucination, especially when I imagine that out of that endless emptiness I can hear the closing bars of the *Freischütz* overture, and then, without cease, for days and weeks, the scratching of a gramophone needle. (RS 179/213-214)

Like the other ruined sites in Sebald's work, this landscape is emptied of people. Throughout the description of Berlin, the accessibility and authenticity of the act of remembrance is placed into question. The past is only retrievable in fragmentary form, and can be perceived (only) through a hallucinatory state of mind in which the mediated fragments of a ruined culture repeat themselves endlessly. The ruins of Berlin are the inaccessible memories overlaid with the 'blind spot', that is, the afterimage, of the ruin landscape.

It has become clear from a consideration of the three ruin landscapes thus far depicted that these are sites of broken narration, realms where the imagination actively engages with,

indeed transforms the material environment, filling in the gaps in the manner of the Korsakow syndrome, a condition described in *The Emigrants* by Aunt Fini as ‘an illness which causes lost memories to be replaced by fantastic inventions’ (E 102/??). The location of cultural production in *The Emigrants* is also such an environment. The narrator’s arrival in Manchester in 1966 sees him take a taxi ride through the city from the airport. Once again, the gaze of the observer is highlighted in the construction of the ruined landscape:

Day was breaking, and *I looked out in amazement* at the rows of uniform houses, which *seemed* the more run-down, the closer we got to the city centre. In Moss Side and Hulme there were whole blocks where the doors and windows were boarded up, and whole districts where everything had been demolished. *Views opened up* across the wasteland towards [what...] had once been the hub of one of the nineteenth century’s miracle cities [...]. (E 151/222 – my emphases)

As with the other sites, these ruins too have the appearance of being uninhabited, as though they had been left ‘as a necropolis or mausoleum’ (151/223), and laid open to the spectator. The narrator wanders through the deserted streets, shaken by the way the city ‘displays’ (156/231) the signs of impoverishment and degradation. This sense of detachment is supplemented by aspects of the hallucinatory and fictional. As he considers not only the monumental Victorian buildings, but also the post-war constructions, the narrator considers these might be ‘mysterious facades or theatrical backdrops’,ⁱⁱⁱ while his experiences in Manchester are described as completely unreal. As the narrator wanders through the industrial ruins to Ferber’s painting studio, the unreliability

of memory are highlighted through the addition of the sub-clauses, ‘if I remember correctly’ and ‘as I now think I remember’ (E 158/231).

One further aspect of these deserted ruins distinguishes them from the others we have looked at thus far: the narrator remarks on the traces of those who had lived there:

by way of a sign that someone really had once been there, the barely decipherable brass plate of a one-time lawyers’ office, bearing names that *had a legendary ring to my ear*: Glickmann, Grunwald and Gottgetreu. [...] all that was left to recall the lives of thousands of people was the grid-like layout of the streets. (E 157/233 - my emphasis)

The Manchester that is evoked or constructed in Sebald’s final story in *The Emigrants* is a space of the past that bears traces of a life that has disappeared. As the engagement with the traces of disappeared lives can be described as the operating principle of *The Emigrants*, this can be read as an emblematic space. In the studio at the centre of this space, the artistic process that goes on there is described as follows:

Work on the picture of the butterfly man had taken more out of him than any previous painting, for when he started on it, after countless preliminary studies, he not only overlaid it time and again but also, whenever the canvas could no longer withstand the continual scratching-off and re-application of paint, he destroyed it and burnt it several times. (E 174/260)

Whereas the environment reveals (only) traces of past lives, the danger of the art work lies in its claim to representation. This is made evident by the narrator as he reproduces Ferber's 'method' in describing the difficulty of writing Ferber's story:

These scruples concerned not only the subject of my narrative, which I felt I could not do justice to, no matter what approach I tried, but also the entire questionable business of writing. I had covered hundreds of pages with my scribble, in pencil and ballpoint. By far the greater part had been crossed out, discarded, or obliterated by additions. (E 230/345)

This repetition of Ferber's method might seem a little self-conscious if one takes Ferber's approach to be the method of the master at whose hand the narrator learns his trade. But both 'methods' have been presented within the text of which Sebald is the author^{iv}. As with all the 'models' of production presented in the text, in trying to describe Sebald's poetics through these models, we are in the position that Nietzsche describes with reference to things in the mirror: 'If we try to observe the mirror itself, then we discover nothing but things upon it. If we want to grab hold of the things, then in the end we come across nothing other than the mirror again.' (Nietzsche 1966: 1172; my translation)

It is more profitable to consider these models as potential descriptors of a process of literary production (and a literary product) that is consciously in search of its own analogies. That process leaves the *artistic representation* in a state of ruin, rather than the traces of the thing that was to be represented. Whereas time or some other process of destruction has ruined the material, the artist sets about destroying his signifiers in order to arrive at an approximation of the trace. The motto of the first story of *The Emigrants*, 'Zerstöret das Letzte / die Erinnerung

nicht' ('And the last remnants memory destroys' in Michael Hulse's translation), is ambiguous, and can also be read as an injunction not to destroy the last thing, memory. Paradoxically, a process of destruction becomes the aesthetic strategy of 'preserving' the signified once it has entered the textual. What presents itself to the reader is a document of that simultaneous process of destruction and preservation.

These four ruin landscapes discussed here, when viewed from the 'spectator' position (as in a theatre), are seldom experienced directly. They are spaces of projection and hallucination. As the 'present form of a past life', these are locations where the time-space continuum is suspended, spaces where the process of ruination is invisible or presented through passive constructions. The exception is Jerusalem, but in order to tell that history, there is need for recourse to another text, a historical study.

In the light of these observations, it is time to turn more directly to the thematic elements of Sebald's writing on ruins, and in particular the historical narratives that underpin the depictions of the ruins. Andreas Huyssen draws our attention to the fact that a major part of Sebald's lectures on the representation of the air war was a revision of a scholarly article that Sebald had published in 1982 under the title 'Zwischen Geschichte und Naturgeschichte' ('Between History and Natural History'). Huyssen opines that, whereas Sebald's position in 1982 was 'in between' these poles, in the Zürich lectures, Sebald was on the side of 'natural history', as demonstrated in the following quotation:

This is the history of industry as the open book of human thought and feeling – can materialistic epistemology or any other such theory be maintained in the face of such destruction? Is the destruction not, rather, irrefutable proof that the catastrophes which

develop, so to speak, in our hands and seem to break out suddenly are a kind of experiment, anticipating the point at which we shall drop out of what we have thought for so long to be our autonomous history and back down into the history of nature? (NHD 67/79)

For Huyssen this is a ‘discourse of a natural history of destruction’ that ‘remains too closely tied to metaphysics and to the apocalyptic philosophy of history so prominent in the German tradition’^v (2001: 89). Huyssen understands this belief in ‘natural history’ to be a resignatory attitude that sees human destructive actions as part of an inevitable natural cycle, even if this goes beyond the so-called ‘natural’ to a point where nature can no longer recover. This, for Huyssen, is Sebald’s metaphysics of nature operating behind the physical phenomena resulting from the bombing strategy of the Allies in the Second World War or, if we look back to *The Emigrants*, the planned destruction of Jerusalem. Huyssen’s critique is based on a rhetorical polarity between ‘natural history’ (negative, resignatory, mystificatory) and ‘history’ and ‘politics’ (positive, critical, enlightening). This ignores the fact that, at the end of his essay on Hebel’s ‘Rheinischer Hausfreund’ in *Logis in einem Landhaus*, Sebald distinguishes between two kinds of ruination. He contrasts Hebel’s finding consolation in the way in which nature is reclaiming the decaying Basel with the view from the Milky Way down on to the blackened burnt-out ruin of the earth. This is not just eschatology but the vision of a new era that, while still dreaming of the pursuit of happiness, is setting the wheels of destruction into motion. (*Logis in einem Landhaus*, 39) These are the ruins of the dialectic of the enlightenment, in that the process of enlightenment already contains the seeds of its own destruction. As such, Hebel’s position (and by extension Sebald’s) can be understood as a critical engagement with modernity.

Nevertheless, Huyssen's is a serious accusation, given the critique Sebald makes of those works that do actually attempt to represent the destruction of the Second World War. Huyssen accuses Sebald of repeating 'exactly that type of discourse' which he rejected in 1982 and, ostensibly, again in 1999. Sebald's disapproval of the 'key text', Kasack's *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom*, derives from the fact that such works cause 'the real terrors of the time to disappear through an art of abstraction and metaphysical swindle/vertigo' (Sebald 1982: 56).^{vi} For Sebald, the construction of a 'presumptive metaphysical meaning' out of the experiences of those 'who had come away with nothing but their lives' (1982: 57); the 'production of aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects out of the rubble of a destroyed world' is 'a process through which literature revokes its right to exist' (1982: 59).

If Huyssen is correct, then Sebald's own works would be ruled out of court by the standards set in his 1982 essay, but it can be argued that Sebald's work is a complex engagement with this insight into the dialectical ruins of modernity. Whereas the works of the immediate post-war period destroy (i.e. make disappear) the traces of reality, his own works are concerned with representing, in an appropriate aesthetic form, the fragments of a destroyed past.

One of the major contextual differences between the scholarly article of 1982 and the published lectures of 1999 is Sebald's development of an aesthetic strategy of fictionalized documentary in which, as suggested above, the traces of the past are of necessity aesthetically appropriated, but that the process of appropriation is signalled, even placed in question.^{vii} Believing he has discovered Sebald's 'blind spot', Huyssen suggests that *On the Natural History of Destruction* gives us 'a re-inscription of the trauma (of the air raids) through quotation' (Huyssen 2001: 89), but Sebald's book also sees and reflects on precisely this danger. Sebald continually foregrounds the mediated nature of transmitted experience, even in the third section

of *On the Natural History of Destruction*. Amongst the many responses to his lectures is a dozen-page letter from Harald Hollenstein, who had grown up in Hamburg under the National Socialists and had experienced the first air attacks on the Hansestadt. However, Sebald immediately interrupts this report with a recollection (and citation) from Chateaubriand's description of the burning of Moscow. But, Sebald points out, this description was 'not an eyewitness account but a purely aesthetic reconstruction' (NHD 87/93), and such a 'retrospective' description of the German cities was presumably impossible, suggests Sebald, 'probably because of the horrors so many experienced and perhaps never really overcame.' He then contrasts Chateaubriand's panorama with Hollenstein's report of the destruction of a bunker during an air attack. Hollenstein is not reporting directly as an eyewitness, but re-telling what his mother had told him. Indeed, in a style reminiscent of Sebald's own, the report ends: 'Many could not help vomiting when they saw the scene, many vomited as they trampled over the dead, others collapsed and lost consciousness. So my mother told me.' (NHD 88/93) This is, as Sebald comments, a 'second-hand memory going back over half a century.' (NHD 93-4)

Here we have the selective quotation of a textual representation of the memory of a memory, interrupted by the selected reproduction of a 'purely aesthetic reconstruction' of a real event by a canonical writer.^{viii} An important word here is 'purely' ('rein'), and it is also a key word in Sebald's 1982 critique of 'a purely natural-historical interpretation of recent historical developments' ('einer rein naturhistorischen Interpretation jüngster historischer Entwicklungen'). Rather than being purely one thing or another, Sebald's texts move dialectically between the details (in which they threaten to lose themselves) and the high vantage point above the material that offers insight but also induces vertigo. Similarly, in place of any 'purely natural-historical' interpretation, Sebald maintains an unresolved tension in his texts,

even in *On the Natural History of Destruction*, where his re-reading of Alexander Kluge's *Neue Geschichten* (the positive documentary form in the 1982 article) indicates a change in his own position, in a different way to that which Huyssen suggests. Citing one of Kluge's sources, Sebald comments that it might well be one of Kluge's 'famous pseudo-documentary devices' (NHD 25/32), a remark that would have been out of place in the scholarly argument in 1982. Similarly, at the end of the second part of *On the Natural History of Destruction*, he reconsiders the perspective from which Kluge views his destroyed hometown:

Here Kluge is looking down, both literally and metaphorically, from a vantage point above the destruction. The ironic amazement with which he registers the facts allows him to maintain the essential distance of the observer. Yet even Kluge, that most enlightened of writers, suspects that we are unable to learn from the misfortunes we bring on ourselves [...] For all Kluge's intellectual steadfastness, therefore, he looks at the destruction of his home town with the horrified fixity of Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history' [...] (HD 68/73)

Sebald re-reads Kluge's work as a dialectic between a 'natural-historical' perspective and an intellectual analysis – though both tellingly share the same vantage-point. It is a reconsideration of Kluge's 'pseudo-documentary art' which allows Sebald to draw a line of tradition from his own contemporary aesthetic back through to Walter Benjamin's angel of history, whose perspective is likewise a high (albeit tempest-blown) vantage-point above the ever-more mountainous rubble of history.

In Benjamin we also have a thinker who actively engages with traditions of ‘natural history’. For it was Benjamin who, in his study of the Baroque tragedy, made precisely this point that anyone studying the ruins of history had to acknowledge the complexities of the scholar’s vantage point. Benjamin writes of the ‘necessity of a sovereign attitude’, but also concedes:

Even then the danger of allowing oneself to plunge from the heights of knowledge into the profoundest depths of the baroque state of mind, is not a negligible one. That characteristic feeling of dizziness which is induced by the spectacle of the spiritual contradictions of this epoch is a recurrent feature in the improvised attempts to capture its meaning. (Benjamin 1977: 56)

The quotation, at the end of the second section of *On the Natural History of Destruction* of Benjamin’s thesis about the angel of history from is not simply there to give Sebald’s metaphysics some intellectual respectability, as Huyssen (2001: 84), but to pose the question about a ‘natural history of destruction’ and the relationship between progress and ruination, and to suggest an aesthetic and philosophical tradition.

The problem of the author/critic’s relationship to his material is a recurring issue to which Sebald’s work offers an eloquent if unsettling response. The question revolves around the author’s sovereignty over his material, a question which Sebald drives to the point of crisis, the point at which this particular reader was truly unsettled. It is the conclusion of *The Emigrants*.^{ix} It is that point where Sebald’s chain of correspondences comes full-circle: Manchester was after all described (by Ferber) as an industrial Jerusalem, but now we are in a hotel room in Manchester (where the narrator feels as if he were ‘in a hotel somewhere in Poland’- TE,

233/350) but looking at photographs of Lodz, once known as '*polski Manchester*' (E 235/352). Before we arrive at the photographs, the narrator piles layer upon layer of fictionalization in Borgesian fashion, where, of course, the theatre motif also recurs: it is as if he hears ('though it was utterly impossible') an opera singer in the nearby Free Trade Hall: 'The sound came from so far away that it was as if he were walking about behind the wing flats of an infinitely deep stage. On those flats, which in truth did not exist, I saw, one by one, pictures from an exhibition that I had seen in Frankfurt the year before.' (E 235/352)

The objects (which appear through the many layers of projection) that the narrator saw were photographs. The point is, however, that the 'knowledge' in these photographs does not, cannot lie on the surface, because, on the surface, they lie. Firstly, there are pictures of merry Germans in the (newly-named) Litzmannstadt. Secondly, there are photographs of the ghettos (like the highly self-reflexive images of the ruins), 'scarcely one of which showed a living soul' (E 236/354). And thirdly there are the images of the 'ghetto factories', highly-constructed images of workers, 'who looked up from their work (and were permitted to do so) purposely and solely for the fraction of a second that it took to take the photograph' (E 236-7/354). Given that this kind of photography might be considered diametrically opposed to Sebald's aesthetic, it is important to realize that the narrator's engagement with the photographs is ambivalent. At first, he admits that he does not know who the young women on the photograph are: '[...] but I sense that all three of them are looking across to me, since I am standing on the very spot where Genewein the accountant stood with his camera.' (E 237/354) This is a central event, because in taking up Genewein's position, his eye is (imagining being) the 'organ for seizing control and taking possession' ('Organ der Besitzergreifung und Einvernehmung' – BU B25), thus entering into the most high-risk dialectic of the book. His perspective may be equivalent to Genewein, but

his feelings are not, for the women objectified in the picture are subjects, albeit (and very importantly) within the narrator's own subjectivity: 'whilst the woman on the right is looking at me with so steady and relentless a gaze that I cannot meet it for long. I wonder what the three women's names were - Roza, Lusia and Lea, or Nona, Decuna and Morta, the daughters of the night, with spindle, scissors and thread.' (E 237/355)

The final scene of *The Emigrants* tests the ethical limits of seeing. Since Sebald's prose continuously offers itself as self-commentary, this moment is where he drives the 'antinomy of the allegory' to the point of collapse, because the need to find / discover meaning in the object also leads to the betrayal and devaluation of the object. The process of ruination never stops even at the conclusion of the book. This is a most disconcerting but also productive way of avoiding closure. Ruth Franklin has expressed how this passage unsettled her, since, through certain factual parallels, the young woman could have been her own grandmother. For Franklin this illustrated the dangers of the 'illusory workings of art against memory', for her grandmother is a real person 'whose experiences during the Holocaust cannot be subsumed in the cycle of life's sorrows'.

[...] my imagining her behind Sebald's loom, like Sebald's invocation of Altdorfer or Virgil to describe Nuremberg, merely substitutes an artistic image for a blank space. The blankness, however, is closer to the truth. When it seeks to do the work of memory, art may be a source of illusion. (Franklin 2002: 3)

Franklin's own response is a striking demonstration of the potential that art (and Sebald's art in particular) has to provoke both the imagination and the conscience of the reader, but 'the

workings of art against memory' are, as I have suggested, precisely what Sebald is writing towards and against. Franklin understands art as artifice here, but art is, in Sebald's presentation of it, not only a conscious construction. Let us return to Max Ferber's studio:

the floor was covered with a largely hardened and encrusted deposit of droppings, mixed with coal dust, several centimetres thick at the centre and thinning out towards the outer edges, *in places resembling the flow of lava*. This, said Ferber, was the true product of his continuing endeavours and the most palpable proof of his failure. (E 161/237-8; my emphasis)

The process of artistic production is a conscious act of destruction, but also a natural eruption of material; a self-conscious art that is also, in part, a natural product. And so, while Sebald's texts may contain a metaphysics of the natural history of destruction (with the dangers of relativization and mystification that implies), his response to that metaphysics is not resignation, but to be found in the production of an art which understands itself as part of nature, but only partly, and thus able to offer resistance through its conscious process of simultaneous construction and ruination. Such a conception can be fruitfully related to another German thinker about the ruin. In Georg Simmel's essay 'The Ruin' (1911), the ruin is emblematic of the relationship between human desire to form material ('the will of the spirit' - 'der Wille des Geistes') and the natural process of decay ('the necessity of nature' - 'die Notwendigkeit der Natur'), as well as of an ambivalent attitude towards formal perfection which was indicative of a decadent era: 'The aesthetic value of the ruin combines the disharmony, the eternal becoming of the soul struggling

against itself, with the satisfaction of form, the firm limitedness, of the work of art.’ (Simmel 1959: 265)

Whereas Simmel, with an aesthetic sensibility formed at the birth of modernism, reads the art work as something static, completed and perfectly formed, Sebald’s aesthetic practice might, metaphorically, be read through Simmel’s observation about the attraction of the physical ruin: ‘[...] it is the fascination of a ruin, that here the work of man appears to us entirely as a product of nature.’ (Simmel 1959: 261)

The ruination involved in the process of representation leads to an ambiguous aesthetic of ruination and construction. This aesthetic leaves the reader wandering through a highly-constructed artifice, maybe even an edifice, that is also a ruin, but which bears (and carries) the traces of reality. But then Sebald the narrator, reporting the voice of Austerlitz experiencing Liverpool Street Station, has offered a more subtle commentary than my own:

I remember, said Austerlitz, that in the middle of this vision of imprisonment and liberation I could not stop wondering whether it was a ruin or a building in the process of construction that I had entered. Both ideas were right in a way at the time [...]; in any case, the crucial point was hardly this speculation in itself, which was really only a distraction, but the scraps of memory beginning to drift through the outlying regions of my mind. (A, 191-2/195)

ⁱ Williams (2001: 82) has noted this fact without investigating the paradox.

ⁱⁱ This sovereign perspective (and its correlative, the loss of perspective in the detail) is prevalent in Sebald's work (see Williams 1998: 103), and frequently results in a feeling of dizziness.

ⁱⁱⁱ The 'perspective' of remembrance is often likened to a theatre in both *The Rings of Saturn* and *The Emigrants*, and here it is as if the narrator is moving through the theatre-set of the past.

^{iv} Juhl: 650, sees simply an analogy 'on the level of narrative' with Sebald's 'poetic strategy'. In his otherwise insightful reading of these passages, Williams discusses the writer's self-doubt and artistic production before presenting that of Ferber's, which in fact comes first. (1998: 100-103).

^v If one examines this passage closely, the assertion is posed as a question and the 'unvermittelt ausbrechenden Katastrophen' are not simply that; their eruption is 'anscheinend', that is to say, subject to the perception of the person who interprets the event (just as the 'gewissermaßen' stands as a question mark before the 'unter unserer Hand sich entwickelnden Katastrophen'). In other words, this philosophy of history is bound up in paradoxes in a way that is not the case with other epistemologies as represented in this passage.

^{vi} The German is 'metaphysischen Schwindel'. The choice of words appears self-conscious, if one recalls the German title of Sebald's earlier book, *Schwindel. Gefühle*.

^{vii} This 'natural-historical' understanding of the ruins of modernization is perhaps the reverse of the positivistic 'natural' reading of free-market capitalism which has become paradigmatic (both in and outside academia) over the last two decades

^{viii} Sebald's position as a member of the 'second generation' enables him to develop an aesthetic that is appropriate to his situation, and that simultaneously allows his works to appear to do justice to the 'realen Schrecken'. See also Huyssen 2001: 82.

^{ix} For other readings of this passage, see: Williams 2000: 108; Parry 1997: 425.